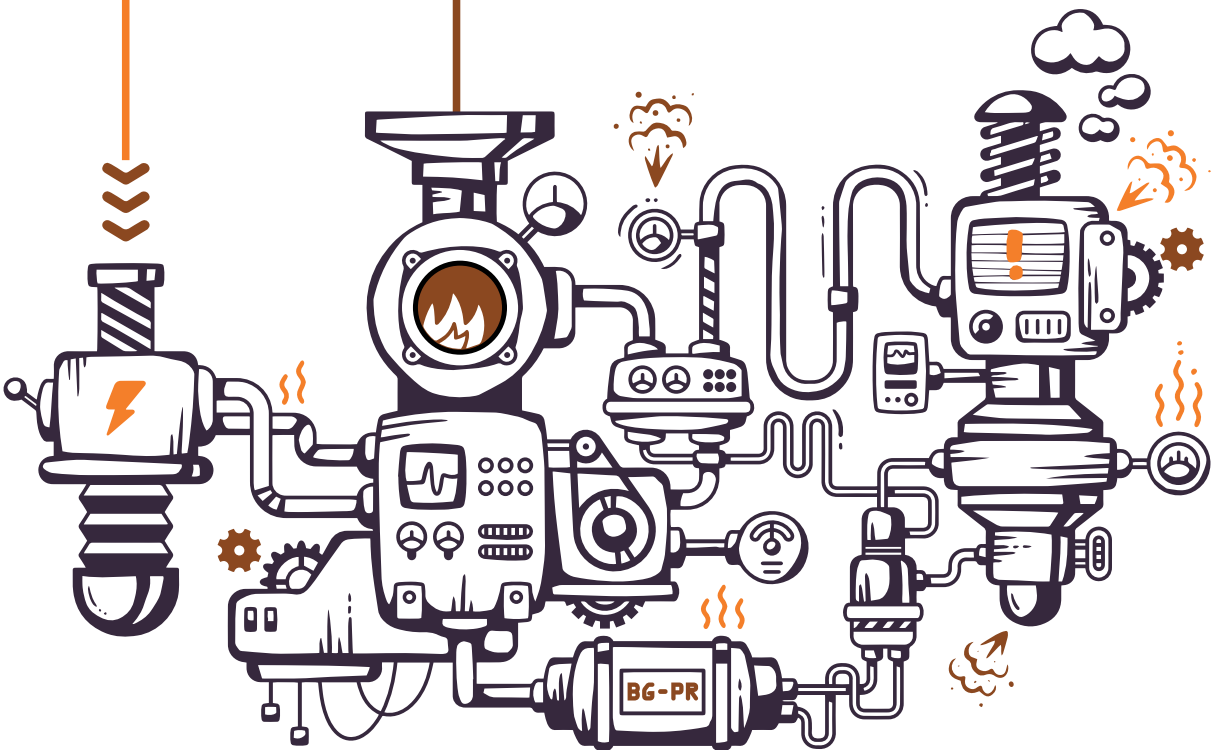


KOSOVO

»»» WHAT DO
CITIZENS
KNOW, THINK
AND FEEL?



BCBP

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Kosovo - what do citizens know, think and feel?

Analysis of public opinion research

The findings of public opinion poll were analysed by Belgrade Centre for Security Policy researchers **Maja Bjeloš** and **Bojan Elek**

Key findings

Although majority of Serbian citizens trusts the Government and supports the agreement that would resolve the Kosovo issue, half of them are not aware of what is the end goal in negotiations with Pristina. Only one fifth thinks that the goal is to preserve territorial integrity of Serbia (in line with UN SC Resolution 1244) whereas half believes this to be the ideal outcome of negotiations as well. However, predominantly negative opinion of Kosovo Albanians among the Serbian citizens, coupled with doubts regarding positive outcomes of the dialogue and the possibility of obtaining a long-lasting peace among Serbs and Albanians in the Balkans, show the existence of cognitive dissonance. In other words, citizens have a strong desire of returning Kosovo, but would not accept Kosovo Albanians having any prominent roles in public life in Serbia. The existence of these contradictory ideas can be traced throughout time: Serbian citizens support the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue but cannot imagine a peaceful coexistence between Serbs and Albanians; they show support for the agreements reached in Brussels and Washington, but do not see any benefits from them, etc. Data clearly shows significant soft power in the hands of the Serbian Government and their ability to affect and shape public opinion of the citizens, especially when taking into account that a significant majority (64%) predominantly relies on television for information, particularly on RTS (public broadcaster). Therefore, the Government obviously has the tools to influence citizens and gain their unwavering trust, yet these are not used to normalize relations between the two communities and the peoples.

Context

COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on Belgrade-Pristina relations, serving as an excuse to the hitherto coalition partners of Self-determination movement (Vetëvendosje) for a no-confidence vote that toppled Albin Kurti's Government. The new Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti immediately revoked the so-called reciprocity measures against Serbia, thus restarting the dialogue that has been at an impasse since the end of 2018; and the dialogue did take a new dynamic, on multiple tracks.

First, in June, Trump invited Vucic and Thaci to a White House meeting, while the informed public speculated a recognition agreement was on the table. However, the Kosovo Specialist Prosecution brought charges against Thaci for alleged crimes committed during the Kosovo war, so the meeting was postponed. Second, the Brussels dialogue soon resumed as well, with a series of meeting between July and September on various topics, including economic cooperation, missing and internally displaced persons, status of minority communities, etc.

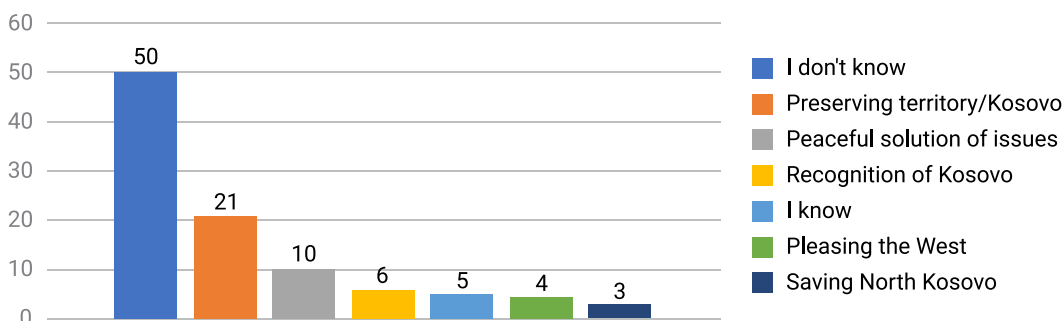
The postponed White House meeting eventually took place in early September and the so-called Washington Agreement was signed on the occasion. Trump administration dubbed the Agreement as a *historic* one and it was similarly presented by both Belgrade and Pristina to their domestic publics. However, foreign policy analysts in Serbia are almost unanimous in their assessment that, while the economic provisions are useful but add almost nothing new, the foreign policy ones have the potential to further complicate the position and relations of Serbia with the EU, other international organizations and several countries.

In the wake of the US elections and before the new administration takes over, Kosovo is yet again in a political turmoil after the resignation of President Thaci over the beginning of the trial for war crimes. Due to the political instability that might lead to new elections in Kosovo, the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue will almost certainly stay out of the spotlight.

On the Dialogue

Serbian citizens are only partially informed about the content of Belgrade-Pristina negotiations and a majority thinks the whole process is not transparent enough. Despite this, half of them support the dialogue, although 90% feel no tangible benefit and ¾ think it had almost no effects. Thus, the citizens seem to believe that the dialogue has the potential to resolve the outstanding issues yet feel it has been wasted on dealing with secondary issues that bring no positive results. The roles of special envoys, both that of the US Richard Grenell and the EU Miroslav Lajcak, are viewed positively by a thin majority.

Do you know what are the goals of negotiations with Pristina?

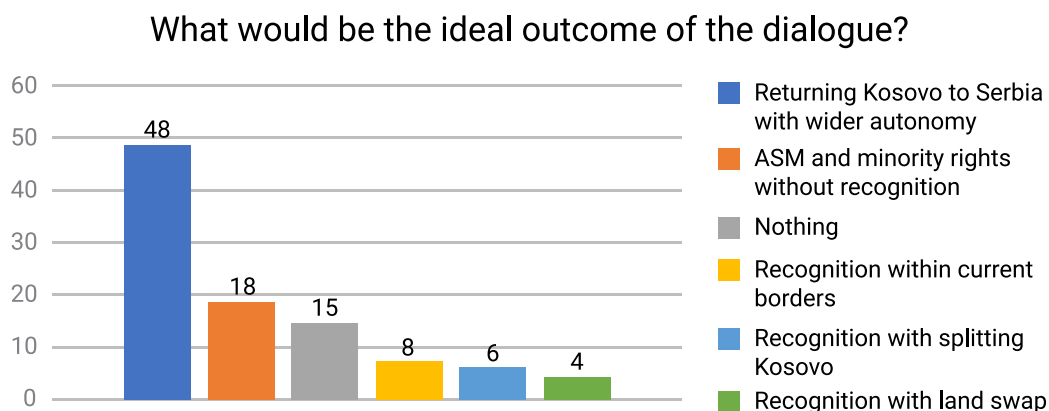


Graph 1: Views of Belgrade's goals in negotiating with Pristina

Half of the citizens do not know what the goals of Serbia are in negotiations with Kosovo (Graph 1). One fifth thinks it is to preserve Kosovo within Serbia, 10% believes it is peaceful resolution of the conflict and only 6% expect mutual recognition. However, 2/3 support Serbia's agenda in the dialogue, a fact that shows little critical examination of the Government's decisions but also speaks volumes about immense, blind trust in their intentions. Since 2/3 of citizens primarily get their information on Kosovo by watching TV, the lack of knowledge regarding goals can also be due to predominantly process-focused reporting with little analysis of the content, but also unclear communication by the Government and the lack of clear policy direction.

A whopping 85% of citizens found the land swap proposal unacceptable, although this idea has been unofficially discussed as a possible solution at some point.

On the Ideal Outcomes of the Dialogue



Graph 2: Views of the best outcome of the dialogue with Pristina

Almost half of all citizens thinks that returning Kosovo to Serbia, with granting of wider autonomy, would be the best outcome of the dialogue (Graph 2). One fifth thinks the best solution is establishment of the Association of Serbian Municipalities with minority rights guarantees, without recognition. Not reaching agreement is ideal for 15% of citizens, 8% supports mutual recognition within existing borders, 6% supports the division of Kosovo and attaching north municipalities to Serbia, whereas only 4% is in favor of the land swap. At the same time, 40% thinks that recognizing Kosovo's independence would not affect their lives at all, 1/4 would in this case feel like losing their identity, and 1/5 would feel humiliated.

These opinions are easily understood considering that the most frequent association to Kosovo among the respondents are monasteries and Serbian heritage, the heart of Serbia and the cradle of Serbs and Serbian identity. It comes as a no surprise that citizens believe Kosovo was taken away from Serbia, they strongly identify with it and think the only solution is to have it returned to Serbia.

Therefore, the citizens do not give up on Kosovo, while at the same time they desire reconciliation and normal relations, although they feel the current negotiations are not heading in that direction. This is where the skepticism regarding the outcomes of the dialogue come from, with half of citizens not believing the final agreement will ever be reached and only 1/4 thinking it could happen within next 3-5 years. Two thirds of citizens think that there are no prospects for normalization of relations in the short run regardless of the outcomes of the dialogue, whereas the remaining ones think reaching an agreement is a precondition for that. This is also why 70% think there cannot be peace among Serbs and Albanians in the Balkans in the foreseeable future. In addition to the lack of tangible results from the dialogue, this pessimism can also be understood considering a big ethnic distance towards Albanians, which is constantly present and promoted in public sphere.

Ethnic Distance and Dealing with the Past

Although half of Serbian citizens have a strong desire to see Kosovo returned, a big majority finds it unacceptable to have Kosovo Albanians in any significant position in the society because they consider the existing differences are too great an obstacle. A whopping $\frac{3}{4}$ would not accept Kosovo Albanians as public officials in Serbia or to be married within their families, whereas $\frac{2}{3}$ would not like to see them as supervisors at work.

At the same time, $\frac{2}{3}$ have no contacts in Kosovo and more than a half have never even met a Kosovo Albanian in their life. An encouraging finding is that $\frac{2}{3}$ of citizens would accept Kosovo Albanians as their compatriots or neighbors. Regardless, $\frac{4}{5}$ still think the differences prevail over similarities between the two ethnic groups, citing religion, language and culture as the biggest ones.

One third of citizens is unaware of the war crimes committed in Kosovo by Serbian security forces, the other third is, whereas the remaining ones refused to answer. Among those that are aware, $\frac{1}{4}$ thinks these crimes must be prosecuted at any cost, whereas one half thinks this should be done only if it is reciprocated by the other side. However, $\frac{3}{4}$ of citizens would find Kosovo-Serbia agreement unacceptable if it did not have provisions related to war crimes. Therefore, although the desire for justice is palpable among the citizens, there is almost total lack of awareness, or a repressed awareness, that atrocities had been committed in Kosovo and Serbia is the responsible party.

Washington Agreement

Almost half of citizens are aware that *something* was signed in Washington, whereas only $\frac{1}{3}$ say they know what exactly that was. However, when asked about specific parts of the Agreement, more than half support infrastructure and interconnectivity projects, finding missing persons and resolving the problems of internally displaced persons, whereas half is supportive of mutual diploma recognition. More than half of citizens is against the one-year moratorium on derecognition campaign against Kosovo, and a similar number is against moving the Serbian embassy to Jerusalem. One fourth of citizens think this Agreement will have no effect, more than a fifth see it as a one step towards recognition of Kosovo as independent and 16% believe it will help economic cooperation. A conclusion can be drawn that the Government failed to clearly and properly communicate about the content of the Agreement. It is possible that the explanation for this failure is in very high numbers of those who are against the moratorium on derecognition campaign. Also, it could be in the fact that citizens are distrustful towards the USA which was initiator behind the agreement causing widespread fears that signing it would lead to recognizing Kosovo independence.



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